

Right Missile Track, Wrong Horse

President Carter's choice of a new basing system to make American missiles mobile and invulnerable to surprise attack removes the only real obstacle to ratification of the SALT treaty. Some false obstacles remain, like the argument about 3,000 Soviet combat troops in Cuba, or whether spending on conventional forces will be increased next year by 3 or 4 percent. The crucial issue is whether SALT enhances American security and permits action to keep our land-based missiles invulnerable. That action is now under way.

Of four final candidates, the "racetrack" system, at \$33 billion, best meets the President's requirements of "survivability, verifiability, affordability, environmental soundness and a plan consistent with arms control goals." Each of 200 missiles would have its own racetrack with 23 underground bunkers at half-mile intervals, spaced so a single Soviet warhead could destroy only one bunker. A roof could open occasionally to let Soviet satellites see that each complex contained only one missile. Yet all 4,600 shelters would have to be destroyed to take out the 200 missiles — impossible under SALT's missile and warhead limits.

A trench system with missiles on rails was favored until it suddenly was discovered to be vulnerable to blast waves. The Air Force's alternative was a "shell game" system of vertical shelters, about 20 for each missile, to deceive an attacker. But it raised arms-control problems. If Russia chose such a system, the United States could never be sure how many missiles were hidden in each set of 20 shelters. The Administration's next preference was for an air-launched missile — an attractive stopgap — but one subject in the long run to the vulnerabilities of the strategic bomber.

The racetrack system finally chosen uses only 25 square miles, a quarter as much land as the trench system, criticized by environmentalists. Yet it has the same "dash" capability: a missile on the racetrack could move from one shelter to another in the 30 minutes it would take a Soviet missile to reach the United States. Even if the Russians figured out which shelter held the missile, it would do them little good. By contrast, many hours would be needed to move missiles in the vertical shelter system. The racetrack, like other mobile systems, depends on the limitations in SALT. Otherwise, the Russians might add warheads faster than the United States could build new shelters.

A question remains. Did President Carter choose the right missile for the racetrack — the 190,000-pound MX? It would carry 10 big accurate warheads and threaten Russia's land-based missiles. Is it really in America's interest to force the Russians to build their own mobile system? Can we be sure they will choose one equally compatible with arms control?

The existing Minuteman III could be deployed faster and more cheaply in a mobile mode than the MX, restoring American ICBM invulnerability without destabilizing the strategic balance. But there is time for the debate that this issue requires. There was no more time to demonstrate that our land missiles would become mobile under the SALT treaty. The same racetrack system could initially accommodate a smaller missile and then the larger MX later, providing a chance for missile reductions in SALT III to make the MX unnecessary.